



The gay agenda

There's a racial divide between the gay community and communities of color, and young gay activists are charging ahead to bridge the gap

By Eric Wolff
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On Saturday, Jan. 10, 630 white people and 45 people of color rallied in front of the San Diego County Administration Building for the legalization of same-sex marriage. They waved their signs, chanted their rhymes and marched a looping course through Downtown, finishing where they started. But when 10,000 are expected, 675 is at least a tad disappointing. And when diversity is a goal, a crowd that is only 6.5 percent non-white (by *CityBeat's* estimate) is a disappointment, too.

Then again, the January march offered a freeze frame of this moment in the marriage-equality movement. Two months earlier, jubilation over the election of the nation's first black president was tempered by passage of Proposition 8, an initiative that amended the California Constitution to strip same-sex couples of the right to marry.

Gays and lesbians and their allies spontaneously marched and rallied up and down the state; a Nov. 15 rally in San Diego attracted 20,000 people.

Lawyers working with gay-rights groups filed a petition with the California Supreme Court to invalidate Prop. 8 on grounds that the majority cannot strip away fundamental rights from a minority. The community paused to catch its breath and hope for the best. By January, tempers had cooled, but the movement pushed on.

Zakiya Khabir, a 31-year-old black graphic designer, had always been politically active, most recently as an anti-war protester and immigration-rights activist. She wasn't involved in the No on 8 campaign because, she admits, she didn't think it would pass. When it did, Khabir, who is bisexual, showed up for a meeting at the San Diego Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center in Hillcrest, along with approximately 300 other people for a post-election post-mortem. Khabir decided to tap the energy of the crowd and became an organizer of the Nov. 15 rally.

The San Diego Alliance for Marriage Equality (SAME), emerged from the mailing list of people who worked on that rally, and Khabir has become a de facto leader for the loosely structured group. The San Diego Equality Campaign (SDEC) also stemmed from the same events; the two groups jointly organized the Jan. 10 demonstration. A few days before the event, Khabir told *CityBeat* that the plan was to do more than get a lot of people marching through Downtown.

“One of the things we’re trying to do on Saturday is really bring out the gay people of color,” Khabir said.

To that end, Khabir spoke at a meeting of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to win its support for the march. She and fellow organizers from SAME and SDEC arranged for a multicultural list of speakers that included labor leader Lorena Gonzalez, immigration activist Enrique Morones, African-American Minister Madison Shockley, multiracial San Diego City Councilmember Todd Gloria, white State Senator Christine Kehoe and others. But even this diverse group of speakers attracted few people of color to the march.

“We didn’t expect it all to happen today,” Khabir said at the rally. “It’ll take a while.”

Race relations within the gay community have always been fraught with tension. Nicole Murray Ramirez, who’s been active in gay and Latino causes for more than 30 years, recalls a time in San Diego when some club owners required pictures be submitted with job applications so they could weed out people of color. In the late 1970s, Harvey Milk became the first openly gay elected official, and his speech writer, Frank Robinson, recalls tension between the black and gay communities.

“They’d always play the macho card,” he said of African Americans. “And the ministers would line up against us.”

The problem persisted through the decades with occasional flare-ups. **In 2002, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force organized its annual conference around the theme of “Building an Anti-Racist Movement.”** The organization’s leader at the time, Lorri L. Jean, wrote: “Institutionalized racism is one of the most significant factors hindering our success as a movement and if we were unified as a community, we could better pursue and achieve our goals.”

But the problem seems to have extended into the headquarters of the No on Prop. 8 campaign itself. The campaign was managed first by Dale Kelly Bankhead and then by Patrick Guerriero, but neither could be reached for comment. Still, sources tell *CityBeat* that little effort was made to reach out to people of color until mid-October. The mayor of Los Angeles, Antonio Villaraigosa, had made an open offer to the campaign to appear in a Spanish-language TV or radio ad that wasn’t taken up until the closing weeks (his radio ad came out on Oct. 24). In the San Diego No on 8 headquarters, *CityBeat* saw Spanish-speaking volunteers offer to call Spanish-speaking households, only to be told there was no such separate list. The campaign didn’t have a Spanish script, either.

After the election, events took a nasty turn when an Associated Press exit poll said that 70 percent of all black voters in California had supported the ban on same-sex marriage, compared with 53 percent of Hispanics and 49 percent of whites. For months, the white gay community expressed rage against black Californians, gay and straight. The Nov. 15 rally was marred in some cities by racial epithets cast at black attendees. Blogs began to fill up with stories of vicious name-calling, and black writers found themselves having to defend their entire community against these attacks. It got so bad that Kathryn Kolbert, a lesbian and president of the social-justice group People for the American Way, felt compelled to issue a statement: “Sadness has turned to outrage at the speed with which some white gay activists began blaming African Americans—sometimes in appallingly racist ways—for the defeat of Proposition 8.”

Khabir was ready to rebut the argument that black voters are responsible for Prop. 8’s passage.

"I think there are fewer safe spaces for black and Latino gay people to be out," she said. "But it's more complex than just saying, yes, there is more homophobia within the black community. There's lots of homophobia in the white community."

Earlier this month, a study sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force debunked the AP poll. It showed that 58 percent of African-Americans voted for Prop. 8, the same percentage as Latinos, who, it's worth noting, made up 32 percent of the electorate in the general election. The poll also showed that church-going habits were a much stronger determinant of voting behavior than was race. But the rage from the white gay community in the months after the election had already done its damage, exposing an ugly divide both within the gay community and between the gay community and communities of color.

Organizers with Equality California, the San Francisco-based gay-rights organization that provided the primary financial and organizational muscle for the No on 8 campaign, are keenly aware of the need to reach out. Though they're hopeful the court will strike down Prop. 8, they're already unofficially looking ahead to 2010, when they hope to put gay marriage back on the ballot. Government-affairs director Alice Kessler told *CityBeat* that they're planning major outreach both through advertising and volunteer efforts within communities of color.

But many in the gay community are critical of Equality California and the others who ran the No on 8 campaign.

State Senator Chris Kehoe, who was the first openly gay elected official in San Diego, said the group was well-meaning.

"They're nonprofit administrators," she said. "We need a professionally run campaign with much more outreach to communities of color and Californians who go to religious services. We might not have been able to change the majority of their opinions; even if we reach 4 to 5 percent we will have gotten enough to win."

Nicole Murray Ramirez believes that traditional outreach won't be enough. He thinks the only way for the gay community to bridge that gap will be to support other communities, something he argues the gay community has utterly failed to do in the past.

"When it came to the Cesar Chavez state holiday, when it came to Gov. [Pete] Wilson and his attack on the Latino community, where were the editorials?" he asked. "There are easily 100 [gay] publications—where is the support for the African-Americans and for people-of-color causes? You don't see support for these other organizations."

SAME and SDEC see it like he does. Both Khabir and Sara Beth Brooks, executive chair of SDEC, said they have no particular animosity to the larger, older gay-rights groups, but both expressed impatience with them.

"If you join one of those groups, what are you going to do, wait for someone to tell you what to do?" Brooks told *CityBeat*.

Both SDEC and SAME have a string of events planned for the next few months. To reach out to Latinos, Brooks, who is white, said SDEC plans to mobilize resources in support of immigrants rights at the May Day marches that have become an annual event. Queer activist and lawyer Charlie Pratt, who is a member of SDEC, told *CityBeat* he had planned to sell a table at this week's Martin Luther King Jr. breakfast and make sure everyone knew the gay community was there in support. SDEC is also laying the groundwork to change minds in harder-to-reach communities.

“We’ve formed a speakers bureau, and we’re training speakers right now,” Brooks said. “We want to go into churches, town councils—show them it’s alright to speak about who we are.”

Brooks said they’ve already done a test run at the Mira Mesa Town Council.

“We had people come up to us and apologize for voting for Prop. 8,” she said.

Brooks believes in this sort of outreach because she, like so many in the marriage-equality movement, are convinced that when it comes to fundamental civil rights, blacks, Latinos and Asians ought to be sympathetic to their plight.

“If I was writing this for Harvey,” Robinson, Milk’s speech writer, told *CityBeat*, “it would have gone: ‘Equality for everybody or equality for nobody.’ If you can strip the legal rights of the minority by a simple up-down vote of the majority, than minorities have no rights at all.”